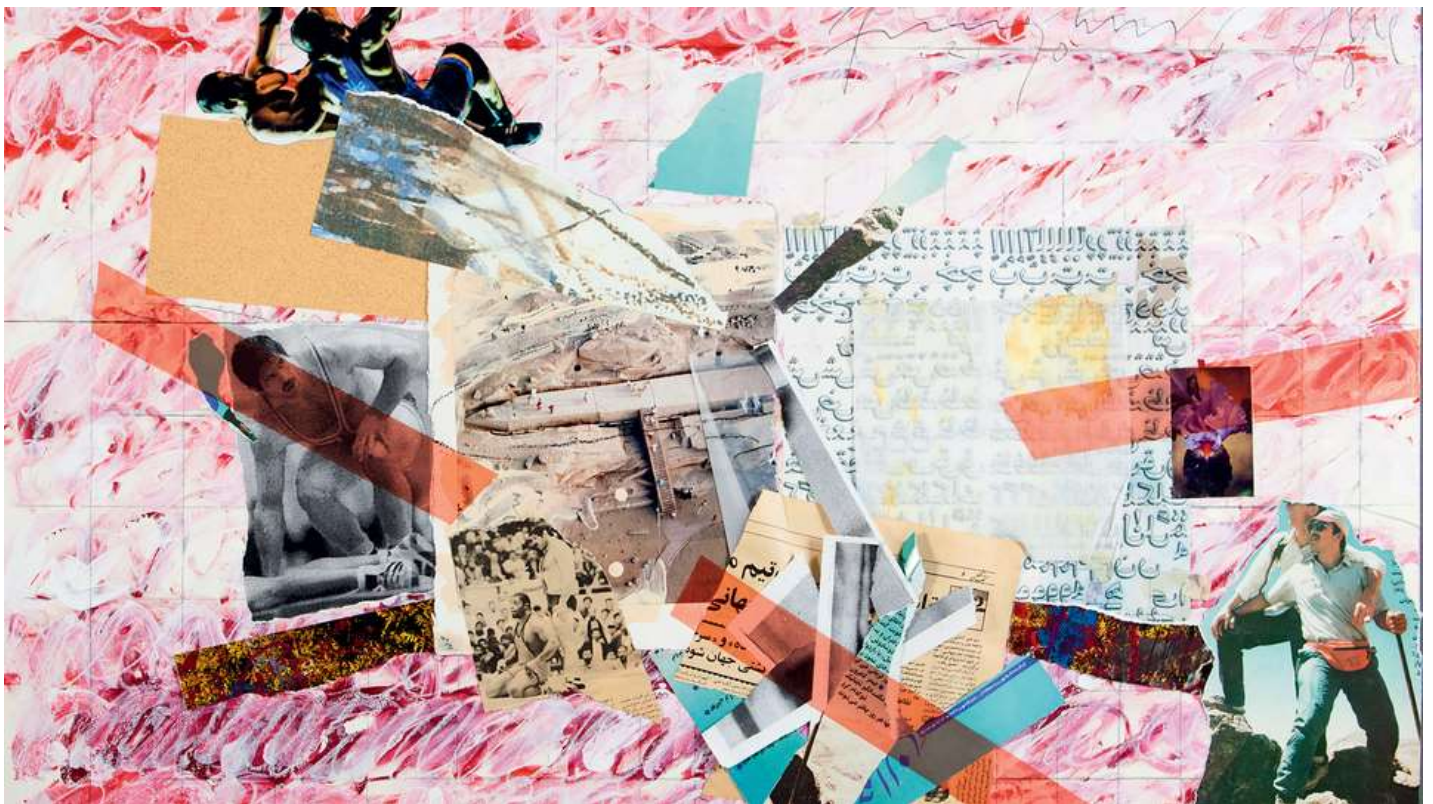


Shirin Neshat and Fereydoun Ave's The Book of Kings Exhibition Launches In Total Arts Dubai

BY [REBECCA ANNE PROCTOR](#) / MAY 29 2019 / 20:43 PM

This March, Shirin Neshat and Fereydoun Ave jointly exhibit separate bodies of work similarly named The Book of Kings or Shahnameh after the work by the epic poem by the 10th-century Persian poet Ferdowsi. Rebecca Anne Proctor explores the artistic and intellectual dialogue between the two artists



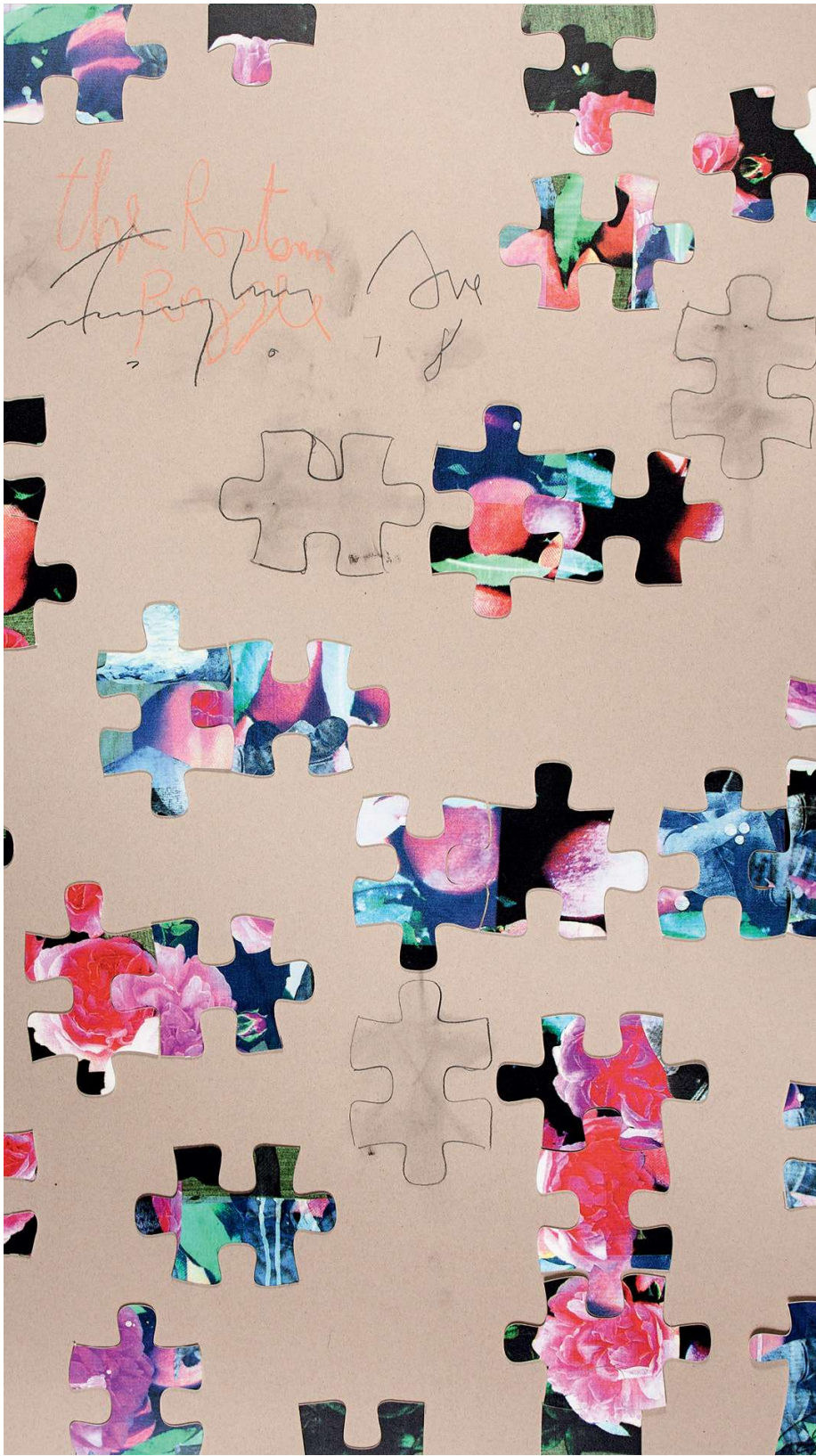
Courtesy of Total Arts, Dubai

Fereydoun Ave. Untitled. 2018. Mix media on paper. 100X70cm.

The renowned *Shahnameh* or *Book of Kings*, an epic poem written in 1010 CE by the [Iranian](#) poet Hakim Abul-Qasim Mansur (later known as Ferdowsi Tusi), is perhaps the signal piece of literature most pertinent to the idea of Iranian identity. The epic chronicles the legends and histories of the Iranian or Aryan kings from primordial times to the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century CE in three successive stages: the mythical, the heroic or the legendary, and the historic.

Of particular note to the work is the character of Rostam, son of Zal and Rudaba. He is the most celebrated hero in the *Shahnameh* and also in Iranian mythology. Ferdowsi, which means “from paradise” and is derived from the name Ferdous, was the name the poet earned after his great work of literature. He became “the poet of paradise.” In the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi immortalises Rostam, always represented as the mightiest of Iranian *paladins*, or holy warriors.

Rostam, alongside many of characters and references to the legendary work, will be on show at [Total Arts at the Courtyard](#) in Al Quoz 1 this coming March through the joint showing of works by Shirin Neshat and [Fereydoun Ave](#). Through their unique style and artistic approach, each artist has interpreted Ferdowsi’s epic poem. The exhibition is a visual dialogue between the two artists as much as it is a chance to commemorate the idea of heroism, not just for Iranians, but for everyone today. Ave and Neshat transmit Ferdowsi’s idealism to a new audience.



Fereydoon Ave. Rostam's puzzle. 2018. Mixed media on paper. 100x70cm. Courtesy of Total Arts, Dubai

“*The Book of Kings* is an ancient book of Iranian mythology, a long epic poem that Ferdowsi wrote, in most people’s opinions, as a way to save the Persian language,” says Neshat. “One of the main reasons that I gravitated toward *The Book of Kings* was that I was drawn to its main themes of heroism, nationalism and ultimately sacrifice, all of which seem timelessly relevant today, especially when it comes to the Iranian society.”

Created between 2012-13, Neshat’s *Book of Kings* includes *The Masses*, a series of portraits of people looking at the viewer as if they were witnessing; *The Patriot*, the contemporary version of the heroes from *The Book of Kings*, they are the activists and the idealists; and *The Villains*, works incorporating illustrations taken from *The Book of Kings* and placed on the bodies of Neshat’s subjects. Total Arts will present her studies and sketches for these various series, providing to viewers the process and the journey that led Neshat to her work’s final presentation.

“I never approached *The Book of Kings* as a way to question my own ‘personal’ identity, rather our ‘national’ identity as so many of us Iranians feel deeply conflicted by our dissipating Persian past, versus the current [Islamic](#) identity ever since the revolution,” adds Neshat. “In many ways a return to ancient literature such as *The Book of Kings*, which persisted on a mythological level to preserve our ancient past and language, seems to have become an intuitive and symbolic effort on my part, to also gesture toward our ancient Persian heritage.”

Neshat’s approach to *The Book of Kings* was conceptual one. “It came as a response to the aftermath of the euphoric, inspirational, and popular movements that occurred all across the [Middle East](#) between 2009-11, including the Green movement in Iran and the Arab Spring,” says the artist. “As someone who is not in nature political, least an activist, I was nevertheless left with a huge impression watching endless faces and narratives of young, brave men and women who put their lives at risk in their call for justice and democracy. With the toppling of one king or dictator after another, I found an uncanny and ironic parallel in between Ferdowsi’s *The Book of King*’s tales of heroes, brutalised for their pure passion, love and devotion to their nation; versus the devastating consequences that took place in the aftermath of such inspiring and what I considered innocent movement.



Shirin Neshat. From the series *Book of Kings*. 2012. Courtesy of Total Arts, Dubai

Ave's contribution to the exhibition is in the form of various series of *The Book of Kings*, which he has done over the years using predominantly the mythological character of Rostam as the central protagonist. "Rostam is the equivalent in the west of the Hercules or Lancelot. He represents a code of chivalry or 'macho mystic,'" explains Ave.

"Rostam represents all that is chivalrous and mysterious in the word champion and its code." The exhibition will include Ave's most recent series *Rostam in Iranestan* (2018) and *Rostam's Puzzles* (2018). "With Rostam, known as the 'champion of champions' in [Iran](#), I am trying to locate the position of masculinity in the Iranian cultural context," says the artist. "I am examining the trials and tribulations of Rostam in order to uncover a certain code of conduct." As Ave rightly states, "Art is not about messages, it's about layers of complexities and contradictions. Artists pose possibilities, not messages." *The Book of Kings* is still so relevant to the life of every Iranian today. "Even taxi drivers and shopkeepers quote it," adds Ave.

"Dreams and reality are two sides of the same coin," he adds. Artists are daydreamers and that wonderful imaginary world made up of demons, lovers, heroes, archetypes and kings that Ferdowsi points to in his work can influence our present reality for a never-ending amount of time. That is the power of a work of art. "In a nation that has battled with so much political upheavals, and human suffering, we are truly blessed as Iranians, to always be able to return to our rich history of mystics, poets who have helped us survive the worst moments of despair," says Neshat. "I'm obsessed with filming dreams, I see so much more truth in dreams than in reality, and how in a state of our dreams and imagination we can truly be free, let go of all our cultural differences, and be naked with our emotions."

The Book of Kings runs at Total Arts until 30 May 2019.